Leadership Institute: Final Action Plan Progress Report

My action plan addresses the crisis occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is directly fueled by anyone who uses a cell phone, computer, or any other electronic device. As a country that borders Sudan, Uganda, and Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the DRC, has had a very tumultuous past that has left the country ravaged by civil war and egregious human rights abuses. The most fatal conflict since World War II occurred in the DRC, resulting in more than 5 million deaths and widespread acts of sexual violence that continue to persist at alarming rates. A major concern that goes hand-in-hand with the persistent sexual violence in Eastern Congo is conflict minerals used in modern day electronics. Through the use of our cell phones, laptops, and other electronics, we as consumers are fueling the violence. Because Congo is so rich with minerals, such as tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold, armed groups use forced labor to illegally mine and export the minerals, which are then funneled through networks and end up in the technological devices which we have become so dependent upon. The sad truth is that the Congolese people are not benefitting from their natural wealth and they are the ones paying the ultimate price.

The key strategies I used to address this problem were education, political action, and fundraising. To raise awareness about the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I organized a lesson plan which I delivered to my entire school community, visiting all grades through the religion classes. Using the skills I acquired this past summer at the Leadership Institute during my course, Documentary Filmmaking for Social Change, I created an approximately fifteen-minute video that introduced the history of the Congo, the conflict, and what individuals can do to take action. I gathered much of my information and resources through the Enough Project’s campaign, RAISE Hope for Congo. I gave all students and teachers a two-sided action handout that introduced the RAISE Hope for Congo campaign, how to join the movement, and what internet links and phone numbers can be used to contact our representatives, senators, and major electronic companies. In addition to the action handouts, I also hand-made over 600 buttons with the RAISE Hope for Congo logo so that students and faculty members can openly show their support for the cause. To take political action, I collected over 250 pledges stating that the signatories would educate others about the conflict in the Congo and they would write to our Senators, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, urging them to pass legislation to ensure the protection of Congolese females and a safe minerals trade. Similar to the rally I organized during my two weeks at Brown University, I also organized a movie screening of the documentary film, “The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo” by Lisa F. Jackson. The event, took place March 4th, and it also featured a Q and A with guest speaker Bonnie Abaunza, humanitarian and founder of Artists for Amnesty International. For the movie screening, I created a colorful flier and a shirt to raffle to a guest. After educating my peers and taking political action, I then organized the proceeds of our Lenten collection to be donated towards helping the women and girls of the DRC. The collection started March 9th and will end the 26th.

Of course, with a job this large I did not work alone. I have worked with Ms. Abaunza since seventh grade, and from watching and helping her organize human rights events and salons, I found my inspiration in the steps of my action plan. I have been a member and a representative of a school organization “Students for Justice” since the beginning of high school, and I educated the school and held the movie screening as a representative of the club. The
moderator of this group is Sister Anna Maria Vazquez, who served as the liaison between the administration and me. The current president of the group is my classmate, Ericka Nevarez. She helped me make copies, answer students’ questions during the presentations, and organize and bring refreshments for the screening. Also, my friend Julie Fitz helped me finalize the informational film about the conflict in the Congo. These individuals were vital to the success of my action plan.

My action plan has taught me more about myself than I ever imagined it could. When I first envisioned the blueprints of my action plan, I was overwhelmed with the goals I set for myself. I soon realized that my summer at Brown University had already prepared me to make my ideas a reality. During my experience at Brown, I had already organized an event and made a unique film, so I knew that I had the potential to take the seeds Summer@Brown planted and watch them sprout into action. I learned that from a small idea, great awareness and leadership can bloom.

Though I have learned much from my action plan, I know that my project has not only informed but also inspired others. Overall, the majority of the individuals I spoke to were not aware of the crisis or even knew where in Africa the Democratic Republic of Congo was located. I stressed the fact that the answer to this conflict was not to throw away our laptops and cell phones, but that we must use these same products to raise awareness, voice our opinions and take action. After my presentation and screening, individuals felt more involved and educated, and were interested in taking further steps to promote the well-being of the Congolese people, especially the women and children. As a student of a high school who constantly thrives to promote social awareness and foster globally-conscious citizens, I feel that I was doing my small part to help the men, women and children of the Congo.

Though I was not able to attend the Leadership Institute Symposium on Social Action, I did find motivation and inspiration for my action plan. My time spent at the Leadership Institute taught me how much influential power I really do have. Because I have learned from my Documentary Filmmaking for Social Change class that hard work and creativity truly does pay off, I have become empowered to continue using my skills and gifts to create positive change. I have and continue to believe that the work I do is important because we are more closely linked to the people of the Congo than most of us may realize, and it is everyone’s responsibility to use their talents to change the world for the better. In short, we must all be leaders and take action.